

VZCZCXRO8718
PP RUEHIK RUEHYG
DE RUEHSL #0139/01 0661643
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 071643Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0752
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRATISLAVA 000139

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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL FALLOUT AFTER MUNITIONS EXPLOSION KILLS
THREE

REF: BRATISLAVA 051148Z MAR 07

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Three civilian-employees were killed and five remain missing after an explosion at the GOS owned Military Repair Company (VOP) in Novaky, Slovakia on Friday March 2. DefMin Frantisek Kasicky offered his resignation in the wake of the incident, but the offer was quickly rejected by PM Robert Fico and withdrawn after Kasicky received the public support of President Ivan Gasparovic on March 5. The offered resignation, and its refusal, were widely seen as political show. That show may be complicated by revelations on March 7 that the MoD -- and reportedly Kasicky himself -- ignored two letters from General Officers in August 2006 concerning problems with the storage and disposal of excess munitions. End summary.

¶2. (U) The explosion occurred at approximately 16:30 on the afternoon of Friday, March 2. It was recorded by several passers-by with cameras and mobile phone videos. Witnesses said the shock of the explosion could be felt up to 10 kilometers away. Images of the scene dominated the news during the entire weekend. As of Friday evening, the PM and DefMin had been joined at the scene by Minister of Interior Robert Kalinak and Minister of Health Ivan Valentovic.

¶3. (U) Up to 49 people were working at VOP at the time of the explosion and up to 25 were in the hall where the explosion originated. The precise cause of the explosion is still not known. Kasicky, however, was quick to tell media that proper procedures were likely not being adhered to in the company. He cited the time taken to account for those who were supposed to be at work at the time of the blast as an example of poor management. VOP General Director Jozef Berak, who has said he feels personally responsible for the deaths, initially appeared to be the figure of greatest public blame. Since March 6, however, speculation has shifted to the possibility that too much ammunition was being stored, and likely being stored improperly, in the hall where rockets were being dismantled or refurbished.

¶4. (U) Kasicky said he is "disillusioned" by the way the leadership of the company responded to the accident. He noted publicly that the company had failed to form a crisis management staff to coordinate the rescue efforts, but added that it is still too soon to decide what action will be taken and whether the company will continue to operate. Kasicky said publicly that though he does not feel "directly responsible" for the incident, he did consider it "politically proper" to offer his resignation to the president and the prime minister. Fico immediately responded in Kasicky's defense, saying "the minister of defense has done the maximum within his power... I will never support a proposal to remove Minister Kasicky. In this spirit I will also inform the President. It would be a great shame if Minister Kasicky left his position." On March 5, Gasparovic likewise offered his support to Kasicky and the DefMin

withdrew his offer to resign.

¶15. (U) On March 6 several relatives of dead or missing employees were quoted in local media reflecting on poor standards at the facility and the dangers of improperly stored munitions. On March 7, two tabloid-style dailies reported on 2 letters sent to Kasicky's office in August 2006 respectively by Major-General Jan Kacmar and General Lubomir Haberl. Both letters mentioned growing problems with too-little space for ammunition storage, and encouraged the MoD to take rapid action to develop new storage facilities.

¶16. (U) Additionally, it is alleged that Kasicky ignored multiple requests to meet from the management of VOP. Kasicky defended himself by saying that the problem of insufficient facilities for the military's store of ammunition is not relevant to the case of VOP, which only handled ammunition destined for destruction. Ivo Samson, a respected foreign policy commentator, noted in media interviews that if MoD had constructed additional storage space for the military's ammunition by January as the General Officers advised, then the MoD would have had additional space for VOP's overflow of ammunition destined for destruction.

¶17. (U) Further clouding the issue is an ongoing investigation of possible corruption within VOP. The management of the firm has been under investigation for conspiring to forge invoices and/or bills of lading. That investigation has now been rolled into the investigation of the explosion, which is being undertaken by the Civil police under the supervision of the Military prosecutor. Normally the Military Police would investigate any incident related to a joint stock company wholly-owned by the MoD, such as the Novaky facility. The arrangement with the Civil police has been touted as an

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effort to avoid the appearance of any conflict of interest.

¶18. (U) Former PM and SDKU leader Dzurinda criticized Fico and Gasparovic for focusing on themselves and Kasicky on his own chair instead of concentrating on the victims and the investigation. He stressed that these first days should be dedicated to the memory of the victims and solidarity with their families, together with a maximum effort to investigate the cause of the tragedy. Dzurinda also commented on the resignation process, stating that it is not possible for a minister to 'offer' his resignation. Kasicky either resigns or not, but once he does the constitution states that the President must accept it.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: It will take time for the GOS to investigate the fundamental causes of the explosion and to decide whether to resume operations at VOP. The story appears to have legs, however, and Kasicky's quick offer to resign, and the President and PM's quick and forceful dismissal of that offer, will look all the worse if the public perceives that the Minister was aware of improper storage conditions at VOP. It will look even worse if the cancellation of a project strongly advocated for by General Officers in the first months after this government came to power, was a proximate cause of the accident. Former PM Dzurinda has handled this very skillfully, noting that instead of offering to resign in the middle of this, Kasicky should have been getting to the facts and stressing the focus should be on the victims. We can anticipate that after the funerals, Dzurinda will zero in on the new revelations, putting a lot of pressure on Fico to dump Kasicky. Since coalition partner Jan Slota (SNS) is already after Kasicky, this could be too much for Fico to continue his defense of Kasicky.

¶10. (SBU) Comment continued: The incident may also affect the ongoing domestic debate on changes to the Labor Code. Fico earlier cited a mining accident, coincidentally in the same town of Novaky, as a prime justification for the new code's enhanced powers for workers to close down factories for safety conditions. End comment.

VALLEE